

Change & The Same

The path from here forward

By Dave Stevens

Some things have changed a great deal in the quarter century since I began my journey in the pro audio business.

In 1980, the “modus operandi” primarily consisted of a lot of proprietary gear along with what could be picked up at music and electronic supply stores. Sound companies would then design and fabricate (read “cobble together”) these non-congruous parts into a functioning sound reinforcement system. (And some of them were quite good.)

Formal audio education? Pretty much limited to the renowned “School of Hard Knocks,” from where many of us successfully graduated, though not without damage to our ego and/or psyche. (Although at least we were usually being paid some nominal fee for this effort.)

The demands on even regional

providers were intense. On the lower end, there were music stores with “MI” gear doing their thing, and often not very well. On the higher end, there were brave souls “growing their own” systems. And these regional entities were particularly hardy, willing to crush any “interlopers” who might dare invade their turf!

At the heart of the effort were people with a consuming passion for the art, and without benefit of formal education, quite well versed in the nuances of sound reinforcement. You had to be – information resources were limited. This was pre-Internet, so no jumping on-line to do research and/or ask others questions. You had to know what you were doing because this was often the difference between a system that worked or not.

Prior to the mid-1980s there were few purpose-built (mass manufactured) loudspeakers to meet the requirements of real-world sound reinforcement. Not only did a sound company need a decent tape measure as well as saws, glue, clamps and a myriad of other tools, but there also needed to be folks who knew how to expertly use them. Oh, and the knowledge of designing an enclosure that didn’t sound like warmed-over goat gack.

The pro audio business is a different animal these days. Thanks to globalization and the “world economy,” we’re rocketing toward a model of commoditization. Not only do we have a plethora of expertly designed and built components and systems from hundreds of sources, but also some of these manufacturers have moved on to tapping offshore facilities to dramatically cut the prices we pay for this stuff.



And more recently, other providers have sprung up to offer gear with feature sets suspiciously similar to those found in products developed over years of serious R&D by more mainstream manufacturers.

The bottom line is that a compressor once costing about \$1,000 (U.S.) per channel can now often be had for less than \$100 per channel. Further, an entire system can be acquired completely pre-configured (cabling and all), delivered directly to a gig. Plug in and rock away!

The ready availability of relatively low-cost professional audio goods is not necessarily a bad thing. It allows sound companies/providers operating on razor-thin margins to be able to upgrade and expand systems without having to rent out the wife and kids. And some of the well thought-out and built "plug and play" system options can get the job done.

But there can be drawbacks as well. It can be persuasively argued that commoditization has had an adverse effect on the knowledge and depth of experience of local and regional providers. Pretty much anyone with a trust fund, fat wallet or good line of credit can – with minimal effort – hang out a shingle and go about acting as a bonafide PA company. Call it "checkbook audio."

Except for one thing, one very important thing. All that is required is the ability to connect the various parts just like the manual says. Frighteningly absent from this picture is a lack of knowledge of basic audio principles, let alone the laws of physics.

Inverse Square? Never heard of it, and besides, who needs more rules? Ohm's Law? Isn't that something Congress tired to sneak into the last budget bill?

If there's one thing I've learned over the past 25 years, it's that to be any sort of success in this business, one must have a decent working knowledge of electronics, physics and related audio topics, and further, one must always be open to learning something new.

And while I'm at it, let's toss in the vital need of an understanding of music, particularly important to those of us who like to include "mixer" in

our job titles at least some of the time.

But all is not lost. Another thing that has changed in our industry, much for the better, are the educational opportunities. Programs like Syn-Aud-Con and Audioseminars.com provide the knowledge that the pioneers had to earn with blood, sweat and hard work.

And wide ranges of more dedicated, intensive curriculums now exist, ranging from "trade schools" to full-out college/university level degrees. Trade associations like NSCA are also committed to presenting a wide range of useful courses; ditto many manufacturers.

Some hard-earned advice: join and participate in the AES! At first glance, it might seem like a group of stuffed shirts, but some of the most important developments in professional audio have come from AES working groups.

With the continuing advent of communications tools, finding out information has never been easier, whether it be peer-to-peer or via useful Internet forums and on-line resource materials. While you're at it, log on to Amazon.com and have a look at all of the great audio reference books available that are worth their weight in gold!

Together, we all must raise the bar, and we can't allow the business to become populated by a bunch of dumb roadies plugging in boxes as per the manual. No matter how good the gear or how "simple and slick" it may be at first glance, our professional responsibility still comes down to having the knowledge and skill to provide the absolute best sound possible.

Many aspire to someday do what we are so fortunate to be able to do on a professional level. Therefore it's our duty to foster learning, to mentor the young and lesser-experienced people that desire a career in sound reinforcement.

Only then will we be able to say we've succeeded as a mature, stable industry. ■

Dave Stevens is a veteran sound mixer/technician who continues to go out on the road regularly in support of concert artists. He's also the founder of the Live Audio Board (LAB). Reach him at dstevens@roaddog.com.

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